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February 19, 1965

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Comments on Vietnam for your newspaper visitor

1. The situation today in Saigon

Our reports are still fragmentary and the matter is not yet sorted out, but appearances are that this was an effort by Catholics and conservatives to get rid of Khanh by taking control of his person and of several other strategic points in Saigon. Since they failed to capture Khanh, my own guess is that the whole effort will fail and that the Armed Forces Council will keep Khanh and gradually reassert authority with little, if any, bloodshed. But of course there could be more explosive results. The intended victor in this enterprise was General Khiem, the Ambassador here, and he has now made public statements which will obviously cost him his job if Khanh wins.

It is of course always possible that the armed forces will somehow bargain this out and that Khanh might lose his job without Khiem winning it. It may take some days to tell just how this one is going to come out. It could make the armed forces more or less unified depending on the skill and firmness of the individuals concerned.

2. Negotiations

The pressure for negotiations is coming mostly from people who simply do not understand what that word means in Asian ears right now. If the U. S. proposes negotiations or even indicates a desire for them, the word in Saigon will be that we are getting out. And the consequences of that rumor would be very severe for our whole position.

So we are planning to act quietly and firmly, and to stick to a policy: that we are helping these people to help themselves and that we are acting appropriately against a sustained and dangerous aggression of a very complex and difficult sort.

At the same time, when the appropriate occasion comes, we will be more than ready to state our position, and our cases, and our purposes

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and our objectives. There is no secret and will be no secret about our policy. And nobody wants a peaceful settlement more than we do.

McG. B.

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